

No Child Left Behind, Or Each Human Person Drawn Forward? Arendt, Jaspers, and the Thinking-Through of a New, Universalizable Existential–Cosmopolitan Humanism

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The thinking of Hannah Arendt has in recent years become quite prominent in the field of philosophy of education, and in educational thinking more generally. Yet it has to be said that Arendt's influence to this point has been more to provide us with a number of stimulating ideas about education than to provide a coherent understanding of the nature and importance of education in human life. I suggest here that we can begin to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of Arendt's educational thought once we see how it follows from and is in constant dialogue with the educational thinking of Karl Jaspers — her personal and philosophical mentor for forty years.

I trace this influence by following the course of the four essays Arendt wrote in the 1940s and 1950s about her teacher and his work, using them to interpret her writings on education — both the much-discussed essay “The Crisis in Education” of 1958, and her last, uncompleted book, *The Life of the Mind*, largely undiscussed in our circles, though it contains her final and most complete vision of education. And I will argue that in the latter work Arendt saw her task as laying the ground for a certain kind of universalizable philosophical education that would, in turn, lay the ground for the establishment of more thoughtful, less banal forms of democratic political life.

Most importantly, I argue that understanding together the philosophical, political, and educational implications of Arendt's and Jaspers's thought could help lead us to formulate a philosophical framework for a *truly* democratic educational policy. This will be a policy in significant ways the exact opposite of the one we now have. Instead of the superficial, self-glorifying, and condescending policy called No Child Left Behind — our banal collective fantasy of banal collective economic and technological progress through the systematic banalization of the processes of education — we might, rather, pursue in addition (recognizing that human life has both banal and higher, more important purposes) a humane policy, respectful of the personhood and freedom of each individual being who is to be educated, which we could call “Each Human Person Drawn Forward.”¹ Through such a policy we would seek actually to “*e-duc-ate*” human beings: that is, literally, to gradually lead people, as singular individuals, from a protected space of nurturance into the public space of political and historical appearance, the space of plurality and reason — which for Jaspers and Arendt, as we shall see, is fundamentally the space of *mutual* cherishment and communication — instead of being satisfied with the mere marshalling of a single-minded herd, as the metaphor behind No Child Left Behind clearly implies is its central intent.

In some ways this appears at the present historical moment as a visionary policy, but in other ways it could hardly be more timely: it is fully in synch with the central ideas of the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, which captured the public imagination, if not, to date, of the Obama administration, which is still struggling to do so. If “we [indeed] are the *ones* we’ve been waiting for,” it is incumbent upon us, both *each one* of “us,” and *us* collectively first, to learn how to become present to ourselves and to others; second, to learn how we can come together as a *polity*, the “One America” that was the basis of Obama’s first, galvanizing speech to the nation, in 2004; and third, to learn what this coming together might *mean* in the context of human history and the human future, how the American democratic project can be seen as integral to a larger, *cosmopolitan*, human project that antedates and encompasses it.

These, actually, are the central “skills” Arendt and Jaspers seek to teach us. So let us now try to attend as closely as we can to how they jointly do so.

“THE [HUMAN] FUTURE LIES IN THE PRESENTNESS OF EACH INDIVIDUAL”:

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TRUTHFUL *INTERPERSONAL* EXISTENCE

Arendt published four different pieces on Jaspers in the 1940s and 1950s, in two pairs — essays examining the political and educational implications of his philosophy followed personal tributes to Jaspers. We will examine how the ideas of these four essays were brought to bear in “The Crisis of Education” of 1958, written directly after the last of them. Bringing into our discussion two of the most important of Jaspers’s many writings on education, we will be in a position to extrapolate where Arendt was headed in *The Life of the Mind*, and to interpret how we might make use of what she says there to reason with a people newly open to “change,” but unsure in what direction that change should lead, about how *truly* democratic “change” *must* to a large extent be *educative* in nature.

“*Lieber Verehrtester*,” the “Dedication to Karl Jaspers” of 1948, begins, “For you whom I cherish and honor above all others.” This public essay begins with the same private words that Arendt used to begin each of her letters to Jaspers. The conjunction of the private and the public is repeated in the two acts of “cherishing” and “honoring” themselves — the former an intimate act between persons, the latter a way they hold one another before the world. And it is repeated as well in the content of the essay. The dedication to Jaspers is twofold: for “your philosophy” and for “the fact of your existence.”²

Jaspers, for Arendt, was a teacher both of public philosophical *content* and of personal philosophical *being* in ways that are entirely interwoven in her experience of him. But it is her experience of this philosophical *being* that *grounds* her experience of the philosophical content associated with it — the experience of the personhood of the philosopher–*teacher* who *draws* us to philosophize:

What I learned from you and what helped me in the ensuing years to find my way around in reality without selling my soul to it... is that the only thing of importance is not philosophies but the truth, that one has to live and think in the open and not in one’s own little shell.... What I have personally never forgotten is your attitude... of listening, your tolerance... constantly ready to... the realization that all human beings are rational but that no human being’s rationality is infallible.³

At the end, she links the manifestation of this personal philosophical way of being with the potential for a new political way of being, a new “world order”:

As you said in Geneva, “We live as if we stood knocking at gates that are still closed to us. Today something may perhaps be taking place in the purely personal realm that cannot yet found a world order because it is given only to individuals, but which will perhaps someday found such an order when these individuals have been brought together from their dispersion.”⁴

Yes, that’s right. “*We* are the *ones* we’ve been waiting for,” Jaspers and Arendt say, *in 1948!* But *they also* say just how we can *find* ourselves and one another, and how we need to do so educationally *before* we can ever come to do so politically. The address in Geneva Arendt refers to was the first of two contributions Jaspers made to the major intellectual congresses held there after the war. The second of these, “The Premises and Possibilities of a New Humanism” of 1949, made explicit the educational implications of the first:

it is only on the ground of personal reality that I can join in the collective life of a whole that would remain imaginary otherwise — of the smallest community, or of the state, or of humankind.... The future lies in the presentness of each individual.... [T]he moral power of the seemingly infinitesimal individual is the sole substance and the real instrumentality of humanity’s future.⁵

There are historical reasons for the new necessity of the cultivation of personal moral authority:

Today...consciousness is scattered.... Violent types of a simplified consciousness are possible in this dispersal; in conjunction with political power they can prevail for moments, but they cannot place their stamp on a spiritual humanity. You do not quickly draft a new dominant basic knowledge.⁶

Before the definitive rise either of religious fundamentalism or the cultural fundamentalism of the current educational standards movement, Jaspers saw both the historic reasons for these “violent types” of “simplified consciousness” and the historic educational possibilities for authentically reuniting humanity, after the Babel-like scattering of its consciousness, in “a new humanism” that would be “a humanism for all.”⁷

These arguments underlie much of what Arendt says in “The Crisis in Education” and later develops in *Thinking* (volume 1 of *The Life of the Mind*) — where she actually finds the philosophical starting point of the “new humanism” that Jaspers simply pointed to. “The problem of education in the modern world,” she says, quite simply, toward the end of the 1958 essay, “lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition.”⁸ The concept of “natality,” broached for the first time in her great political book of that year, *The Human Condition*,⁹ as the fundamental characteristic of political action, is, at the very end of the essay, applied to the educational sphere: “What concerns us all and cannot therefore be turned over to the special science of pedagogy is the relation between grownups and children in general, or putting it in even more general terms, our attitude toward the fact of natality.”¹⁰ Politically, that is, we need to assume a new attitude toward education within these new historical circumstances: because

consciousness has become scattered, we can no longer cultivate it single-mindedly; we need to cultivate it under conditions of *plural*-mindedness. This is just where the importance of “thinking” enters in, nearly twenty years later. “Thinking” is to the individual what “action” is to politics: the spontaneous “two-in-one” of beginning oneself and one’s worldview anew.¹¹ It is the “pre-sentness” both to oneself and to the human future that Jaspers called for in his essay on “The Premises and Possibilities of a New Humanism” in 1949. After all these years of further thought, Arendt was finally able to clarify what she meant in 1958, in saying that “the function of the school is to teach children what the world is like,” *so as* “to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world”¹²: the teacher’s personal presentation of the world — as old in itself, but new to the student — is the precondition for each person’s ability to newly *re*-present it, first to themselves, and then to others. The inner re-presentation of thinking can then become the outer re-presentation first of aesthetic then of political “judging.” The presentness to oneself in thought — under educational conditions where, first, persons together, then the general public, *also* think — becomes what she calls, from Immanuel Kant, the *sensus communis*, a *shared, mutual* coming-to-thought.

RESOLVING THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION BY COUNTER-ATTACKING THE SOCIAL “BLOB”:

CULTIVATING PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING AND AESTHETIC JUDGING AS THE
PERSONAL AND POLITICAL ANTIDOTES TO THE BANALITY OF MODERN LIFE

The first essay Arendt wrote about Jaspers was about just this. “What Is Existential Philosophy?” of 1946 traces the history of existential thinking from Soren Kierkegaard through Martin Heidegger to Jaspers. Existential philosophy, she says, began in the wake of the Hegelian system, “of which no one could ever be sure whether it provided a residence or a prison for reality.”¹³ Kierkegaard’s thinking witnessed “the birth of the self” from the death of speculative philosophy.¹⁴ Heidegger’s thinking witnessed the commitment of the self to resolute action in the world through the thought of its “nothingness” in its own mortality¹⁵; yet this in the end was only a way of immortalizing the self by embodying it in the world, not, in the end, a way of committing oneself to anything more than one’s own selfhood. Jaspers’s definitive contribution, Arendt claims, “consists of... a personal *appeal* [emphasis hers] to the *life* force [emphasis mine] in oneself and in others.”¹⁶ This was the germ of what later became the central focus of her thought on *nativity* rather than *mortality*. In *The Life of the Mind*, that life force, appearing within self-aware individuals, is called “thinking”; among groups of individuals who think *together*, in appeal to a *common* life force, it is called “judging.” The German word for “reason,” *Vernunft*, has a temporal reference to the present built into it: it implies a “making of a *now*” (the “*nun*” in *Vernunft*). Arendtian “judgment” is the formation of consensus among thinking persons, through which they *become* present to one another in public space. As the Latin root of our word “argument” implies, they enter into a space of common *appearance* (*argentum* — “shining,” like “silver”). They “connect through communication with the freedom of others.”¹⁷

Arendt’s 1958 essay about Jaspers as a public person, “Karl Jaspers: A *Laudatio*,” is also about this public aspect of personhood, about the public “dignity

that pertains to a man insofar as he *is*, more than everything he does or creates” (in a sense the central concern of the entire collection in which it was published, *Men in Dark Times*):

We must change our views and forsake our habit of equating personal with subjective, objective with factual or impersonal. These equations come from scientific disciplines, where they are meaningful. They are obviously meaningless in politics, in which realm people on the whole appear as acting and speaking persons and where, therefore, personality is anything but a private affair. This *daimon*... this personal element in man can only appear where a public space exists; that is the deeper significance of the public realm, which extends far beyond what we ordinarily mean by political life. To the extent that this public space is also a spiritual realm, there is manifest in it what the Romans call *humanitas*.¹⁸

She clarifies what she means by this last term in a stunning passage:

This realm, in which Jaspers is at home and to which he has opened the ways for us, does not lie in the beyond and is not utopian; it is not of yesterday nor of tomorrow; it is of the present and of this world. Reason has created it and freedom reigns in it. It is not something to locate and to organize; it reaches into all the countries of the globe and into all their pasts. And although it is worldly, it is invisible. It is the realm of *humanitas*, which everyone can come to out of his own origins. Those who enter it recognize one another, for then they are “like sparks, brightening to a more luminous glow, dwindling to invisibility, alternating and in constant motion. The sparks see one another, and each flames more brightly because it sees others” and can hope to be seen by them.¹⁹

Arendt did not draw out explicitly the educational implications of these passages, but I think they are clear enough to those of us who feel we have entered, at one time or another, this realm of *humanitas*, which, of course, is central to what we do when we participate in experiences in “the humanities.” In a way that unites those two things of which Kant said he was in awe — “the starry skies above” and “the moral law within” — we evoke the personhood of one another through the “sparks” of moral insight, “which everyone can come to out of [their] origins” through the activity of thought. The internal space created by thinking, projected into the public space of judging, creates the experience of the mutual recognition of personhood: “the sparks see one another, and each flames more brightly because it sees others and can hope to be seen by them.” I know of no more beautiful description of what happens when we philosophize together, as sometimes happens in rooms such as this one, or the rooms back at home in which we seek to think together with our students and colleagues. These rooms, sometimes, become images of a beautiful moral *cosmos*, where *we* are the stars that shine in the presence of one another, and also the images of stars that have shone in the past and will shine in the future. As David Hansen puts it in his *Exploring the Moral HeART of Teaching*, we grow “closer apart and farther together” as persons as this moral cosmos is created. We shine for one another, and in so doing illuminate the universe.²⁰

This shining, however, is not *just* a nice thing we can do for one another from time to time. It also has great political and historic significance, within the “dark times” to which the title of this collection refers: being the only way we can emerge, individually and collectively, from the *dullness* of the banality created by our modern historical circumstances. Arendt came to think about thinking through thinking about Adolf Eichmann’s inability to think for himself — *his* very *lack* of

personhood presented a clear, shining image of the evil of modern banality.²¹ In our current world, “thinking” and “judging” are not just luxuries or for the few who can govern the many: if they are not cultivated in the preponderance of humanity, our world will be engulfed by the evil of this banality. These days we don’t have to look at all far to see just how evil things can get if we don’t. Eichmann unthinkingly sent merely *millions* to gas chambers; we are now collectively creating a *global* gas chamber that may well destroy the lives of billions if we don’t take effective collective action against it quite soon. And this is just one of the *many* “inconvenient truths” we now need to humanly confront to assure our collective survival.

Creating the educative space for the appearance of personhood — for the emergence “of what is new and revolutionary in *each* child” (emphasis mine), as Arendt puts it in “The Crisis in Education”²² — is the antidote for the modern malaise of unthinking, banal sociality which Arendt scholar Hanna Pitkin has called “the attack of the blob.”²³ The moral cosmos of those who *think* — first separately, then together — fills blob-like, undifferentiated social space with plural public personhood amidst the dissolution of authority and tradition. Only when relatively everyone becomes free to think for themselves and judge amongst one another will the moral bulwarks once set by the few become effectively re-established: “thinking” and “judging” are the preconditions for good “willing” (*Willing* was volume 2 of *The Life of the Mind*) and beneficent action on the part of a non-bloblike, many-personed public, aware both of its personal and of its political “life-force.”

THE INNER WEALTH OF NATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY:

THE EDUCATION OF A RESPONSIBLE COSMOPOLITAN CITIZENRY

We can now better understand what Jaspers said in 1949 in “The Premises and Possibilities of a New Humanism”: “it is only on the ground of personal reality that I can join in the collective life of a whole that would remain imaginary otherwise — of the smallest community, or of the state, or of human-kind.”²⁴ Arendt’s last-collected piece on Jaspers, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” of 1957, brings the educative personal acts of “thinking” and “judging” into the largest human space of appearances: the sphere of state and world politics brought about by general “willing.” “Mankind, which for all preceding generations was no more than a concept or an ideal,” she says, “has become something of an urgent reality.” We are now placed in conditions of “negative solidarity, based on the fear of global destruction.... [This] may well turn out to be an unbearable burden, and it is not surprising that the common reactions to it are political apathy, isolationist nationalism, or desperate rebellion.... [T]he solidarity of mankind can be meaningful in a positive sense only if it is coupled with political responsibility.”²⁵

These words were powerful in 1957, but how much *more* powerful they appear *now*! The masses of humankind have now been clearly called by the facts of global history to take a part in the preservation and renewal of the human and natural world on earth. And masses of educators must both themselves take, and also be publicly given, the responsibility for cultivating this responsibility — not *just* by presenting what we know, negatively, about present dangers, but by positively cultivating the

faculties that draw people to desire to take a responsible part in collective solutions to them.

Arendt says something, derived from Jaspers's "new humanism," about what this educational shift would look like:

If the solidarity of humankind is to be based on something more solid than the justified fear of our demonic capabilities...., then a process of mutual understanding and progressing self-clarification on a gigantic scale must take place.... In this universal communication, held together by the existential experience of the present [thinker], all dogmatic...contents are dissolved into processes, which, because of their relevance to my present existing and philosophizing, leave their fixed historical place...and enter a realm of the spiritual where all are contemporaries.²⁶

But this essay is largely informed by Jaspers's book *The Future of Mankind* — and we need to supplement it with some of the things Jaspers says there to begin to understand just how mutual recognition can lead to mutual responsibility, how these spiritual phenomena can, and must, become politicized.

There is a concise statement of this in the penultimate chapter, "Reason and Democracy":

Democracy is not a fiction of the sovereign people as a personal ruler — an authority whose supreme wisdom is charged with the sole responsibility by all individuals, who then feel free of responsibility themselves. *Democracy is every individual...* If we want democracy, this means that *each, by their existence, must take care of the whole*. He cannot ask to be cared for by a state that he does not care for with all his good will, all his knowledge, all his capacities.... [D]emocracy is not primarily a claim of men upon the state but everybody's claim upon himself...[and] great politics is communal self-education to reason.²⁷

In the last chapter of *The Future of Mankind*, "Fear and Confidence," Jaspers voices a prophecy of the role the American democratic public, as a whole, might someday choose to play in creating a livable future, for themselves together with the rest of humanity, by conducting just such a communal self-education, first among themselves and then for the whole of humankind, much as individuals proceed from private thinking to collective judgment:

There, where people have suddenly come to change and reflect before, the world situation may make everyone feel the unprecedented responsibility for the course of humankind.... A great transforming impulse might jolt the Americans out of superficial optimism, moral pharisaism, out of the rationalism of know-how, and awaken them to their own selves. A nation that constituted its government wisely and successfully...may yet do the extraordinary which the life or death of mankind now depends upon.²⁸

Jaspers seems to have foreseen something like the "jolt" of the events of 2001 and the disastrous presidency of George W. Bush, on the one hand, and the "transforming impulse" of the candidacy of Barack Obama, who ran under the aegis of Lincoln and had his inaugural address bound with an Emerson essay. And, it seems, the best way we can answer the abstract question of the connection between the cultivation of mutual recognition and the cultivation of mutual responsibility is to think about what we as educators can and must now *do* within these new political and historical circumstances.

What can we do, educationally, to make *good* on the promise of Obama's campaign? This is the question on which I have focused my own recent thinking:

suggesting, first, courses on the “*personal* foundations of education” for all teachers; second, the transformation of the discipline now called “English/Language Arts/Literacy” into “Personal Studies” — the vehicle for the “new humanism for all people” that Jaspers and Arendt envisioned — so that this discipline, which has always had the human spirit at its heart, need no longer pretend in the public eye only to focus on “the letter”; third, tracing the course of Obama’s own education in thinking, judgment, and responsibility; and, finally, placing the story of American history within the history of cosmopolitan thought outlined in Jaspers’s *The Origin and Goal of History* of 1947, which traces the evolution of humanity from the “Axial Age” in which the great exemplars of personal presence — Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus — brought forth a Great Leap of *Personal* Being, initiating a global movement toward wisdom in human life, which needs now to eventuate in a Great Leap of *Political* Being, what Columbia’s Robert Thurman calls “the collective pursuit of *real* happiness” and “*human* liberation” through the educational institution of continual “*inner* revolution,” the practice of free mindfulness toward oneself and others.

The central call of Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope* was for “a broad majority of Americans...engaged in the project of national renewal[;] who see their own self-interest as inextricably linked to the interests of others[;]...[who] think in terms of ‘[I and] Thou’ [not just ‘me’ and ‘us’].”²⁹ I hope I have made apparent how Jaspers and Arendt have shown that we need a clear *public* philosophy of education in order to *effectively* respond to this call. Though these are times of fewer paying jobs for philosophers of education, there may never have been another time *in history* when we have had more vital work to do. Philosophers of education, of all stripes, have long been — to take a phrase from the poet Shelley — the “unacknowledged legislators of humankind”: enabling first persons, then publics to think and judge for themselves. Our present urgent task is to gain public acknowledgment for this human life-force that we have preserved and renewed — though for the most part in select communities — for centuries: the preservation of human life as a whole now seems to depend closely upon the universalization of the personal responsibility it has long been our central task to cultivate.

1. An idea from my student Robert Tesmond.

2. Hannah Arendt, “Dedication to Karl Jaspers,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 212–13.

3. Arendt, “Dedication to Karl Jaspers,” 213–14.

4. *Ibid.*, 216.

5. Karl Jaspers, “On the Conditions and Possibilities of a New Humanism,” in *Existentialism and Humanism: Three Essays*, ed. Hanns E. Fischer, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: R.F. Moore, 1952), 98.

6. Jaspers, “On the Conditions and Possibilities of a New Humanism,” 81–82.

7. *Ibid.*, 83.

8. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Penguin, 2006), 191.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8–9, 177–78, 191, 247.
10. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 193.
11. Hannah Arendt, *Thinking*, in *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), esp. 179–93.
12. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 192, 193.
13. Hannah Arendt, “What Is Existential Philosophy?” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 164.
14. Arendt, “What Is Existential Philosophy?” 173–76.
15. *Ibid.*, 176–82.
16. *Ibid.*, 182.
17. *Ibid.*, 183.
18. Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), 72–73, my emphasis.
19. Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio,” 80.
20. David Hansen, *Exploring the Moral HeART of Teaching: Toward a Teachers Creed* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 156.
21. Arendt, *Thinking*, 3–5.
22. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 189.
23. Hannah Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
24. Above, p. 3, also note v.
25. Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), 82–83.
26. Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” 84–85.
27. Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 308–9, 312, (emphasis added).
28. Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb*, 320.
29. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 40, 216.